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Maksim the Greek and the death of the first tsarevich Dmitrii (1553)

Historical episode or edifying anecdote?

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The three main characters of this study have made a long journey during their lifetime and still continue to travel in the pages of historiography. Maxim the Greek (ca. 1470-1555 or 1556) was born in Arta (Epirus), studied in Corfu, visited Florence, Milan and Venice, where he worked with the finest philologists of the time and listened to Savonarola’s preaching, then came back to his orthodox roots on Mount Athos, and finally was invited in Muscovy, to amend Slavonic versions of the liturgical and canonical books. There, he was involved in Church polemic, condemned twice as heretic (1525, 1531), sentenced to prison, but finally vindicated and he lived is last years as a venerable starets at the famous Trinity St. Sergius monastery. The Russian Church proclaimed him a saint in 1988. Ivan the Terrible (1530-1584), the first Russian tsar, rode long campaigns, changed his capital and turned upside down the government of his country, was torn apart between tyranny and extreme humility, theology and buffoonery. His nemesis, Andrei Kurbskii (1528-1583), a learned nobleman and a devoted admirer of Maxim the Greek, was at first a faithful counselor and trusted captain of Ivan the Terrible, until he fled to the enemy in 1564 and denounced Ivan’s tyranny. From then on, he lived in the service of the Polish king, although he retained his orthodox faith. The authenticity of the famous correspondence between Ivan the Terrible and Andrei Kurbskii seems at present established¹. Kurbskii is also known as the author of a History of the grand prince of Moscow (ca. 1573-1583?). Written in exile, it was somehow repatriated and caught the attention of Muscovite elites in the 1670s-1680s². Thus, the text undertook a travel from Poland to Muscovy, but also a journey through time, skipping almost a century during which one does not know about its whereabouts. Rich in polonisms and neologisms, it seems to have also borrowed from Russian


sources. Doubts about its (complete or partial) attribution to the real Kurbskii have been expressed\(^3\). Nevertheless, “Andrei Kurbskii”, is the key “author figure” (as in father figure) of this text and we address him as such.

The death of tsarevich Dmitrii, the firstborn son of Ivan the Terrible, on 4\(^{th}\) June 1553, happens in a critical political and dynastical context. Some facts are well known, but the precise circumstances are not undisputed. One can spot discrepancies between official and unofficial, Russian and foreign sources. Andrei Kurbskii sets up the episode as part of an elaborate tale. His endeavor can truly be described as a “literary mediation”, allowing his reader to acquire a personal, almost intimate knowledge of the tsar and to develop a broad reflection about the spirit vs. the letter of religion, and the moral responsibility of the sovereign.

I. HOW DID TSAREVICH DMITRII DIE ?

What is certain is the following. On 2 October 1552, Ivan IV and his army take by storm Kazan, capital of a Tatar khanate heir of the Golden Horde. This opens the road to Muscovite expansion on the Lower Volga, and, ultimately to Siberia. On October 12, Ivan leaves Kazan on his way back to Moscow. When he reaches the town of Vladimir, he is told that his wife Anastasia has given birth to their first son, Dmitrii. The exact date is uncertain. 26 October (St. Demetrios) is too late. It could be 19 October (St. Varus/Vaʁ), because Varus is presented as a special protector of the child. The firstborn tsarevitch is baptized at the Trinity Saint-Sergius monastery in December. On 1-3 March 1553, Ivan the Terrible falls ill and seems to be dying. He asks his boyars to swear allegiance to his son, but some of them object, unwilling to obey the Urevidichi-Zakhariny (aka the Romanovs), the family of tsarina Anastasia. Against all odds, Ivan recovers and undertakes a pilgrimage to the faraway St. Cyril’s monastery on the White Lake. During the trip, the infant tsarevich Dmitrii dies, in June 1553, probably on the 4\(^{th}\). He is buried in Archangel church of the Kremlin, in the tomb of Ivan IV’s father, Vasilii III. Strangely, the inscription on the tomb mentions his death on 4 June 1554 (not 1553). Another male heir, tsarevitch Ivan Ivanovich is born on 28 March 1554. A year or two later, Maxim the Greek dies at the Trinity-St. Sergius monastery (21 January 1555 or 1556).


7061 [1553]. Того же лѣта, мѣсяца Мая, поѣхалъ царь и великій князь Иванъ Васильевичъ всея Руси и съ своею царицою и съ сыномъ царевичемъ, Дмитрѣемъ и съ братомъ княземъ Юрьевъ Василевицемъ помолиться къ манастирумъ: къ живоначальной Троицѣ, да оттолкъ въ Дмитровъ монастырь, на Пѣсочну къ Николу; да ту же государы сѣль въ суды въ Яхромѣ-рѣкѣ, да Яхромою въ Дубну, да былъ у Пречистые въ Медвѣдевъ пустынѣ, да Дубною въ Волгу, да былъ государь въ Колязинѣ монастырь у Макарія чюдотворца, да оттолкъ на Углебъ и у Покрова въ манастирѣ, да оттолкъ на усть-Шексны на Рыбную, да Шексною вверхъ къ Кирилу чюдотворцу; да въ Кириловъ манастиръ государь молебная совершить, учредивъ братію, да ѣздилъ единъ въ Ферапонтовъ манастиръ и по пустынямъ, а царица великая княгиня была въ Кириловъ монастырѣ. И оттолкъ царь и государь поиде опять Шексною внизъ, да и Волгою внизъ на Романовъ и въ Ярослѣлѣ; и въ Ярослѣлавъ государь былъ у чюдотворцовъ, да поѣхалъ въ Ростовъ и былъ у чюдотворцовъ, да въ Переславль, къ Живоначальной Троицѣ; и приѣхалъ государь къ Москвѣ мѣсяца Іюня. Преставился царевичъ князь Дмитрій. Того же лѣта, мѣсяца Іюня, не стало царевича князя Дмитрія въ объѣздѣ въ Кириловскому, назадъ ѣлунѣ къ Москвѣ; и положили его въ Архангельѣ въ ногахъ у великаго князя Василия Ивановича.

For this period, the so-called Nikonian Chronicle reproduces official annals of the Muscovite court. Among its manuscripts, the Illuminated chronicle is known under two variants: the so-called Synodal tom (Sinodal’nyi tom) and the Imperial book (Tsartvennaia kniga). If part of the tale dates from 1553, it has been revised in 1568-1576, probably under the instructions of Ivan the Terrible himself. The text scrupulously records the itinerary of the pilgrimage “among monasteries”, most of it by boat. The last three lines explain that tsarevich Dmitrii deceased (no cause mentioned), on the way back to Moscow and was buried in the Archangel church.


О царскомъ хождении по святымъ мѣстомъ и царскихъ чадехъ ихъ, чюдо о водѣ святаго Никиты и о распространеніи манастира его. Внегда же убо милосердыин Богъ Казанскаго царства поручи святопомозанному царю и великому князю Ивану Васильевичу, вся Руси самодержцу, и того родися ему сынъ, царевичъ Дмитрій, отъ христолюбивыя царици Анастасии. Преславныя же ради побѣды и ради чюдородия взыдающе Богу благодареніе, поидоша царь и царица и съ отрочатемъ си по святымъ мѣстомъ помолитися. И быша у Троици въ Сергіевѣ манастиры, и у святаго Николы на Пѣсношы, и у Пречисты въ Медвѣдевъ пустынѣ, и у преподобнаго Макарія въ Колязиновѣ, и у

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The Book of degrees, is the first attempt at writing Russian history by reigns, comparing it to the ascension of a ladder, in the spirit of John Climacus, from saint Vladimir (first step) to Ivan the Terrible (17th step). It was directed by Metropolitan Macarius, head of the Russian Church (1543-1563), and the archpriest Andrei (to become Metropolitan Athanasius). They had the use of Muscovite annals where they borrowed the description of the itinerary. But their tale offers us a first literary mediation of the facts, or a first attempt at giving them a meaning. It plays on sharp contrasts between joy, grief and again joy, to enhance how the destiny of the Muscovite realm is the object of a special attention from the Providence and how Ivan and his spouse, Anastasia, maintain an exemplary piety in every circumstance. The birth of Dmitrii is associated with the “much glorious victory” at Kazan and the pilgrimage is undertaken to celebrate this happy events (no mention is made of Ivan the Terrible’s illness). But “by God’s design”, the child “began to fall ill, and in this illness he departed to God” (болѣзнавати начя и в тои болѣзни отиде къ Богу). The parents are in despair, having lost their first son, after two daughters. Yet, they do not lose faith and the last leg of the pilgrimage brings back joy. In Rostov, they fervently pray on the tomb of St. Leontius to obtain a new “heir to their realm” and they begin to feel “some solace”. Then, they visit the tomb of St. Nicetas of Pereiaslavl, with the same pressing demand, and on that very night, in Pereiaslavl, the tsarina “conceives in her womb” (a Biblical expression). The second half of the chapter is devoted to the miracles of Nicetas after the birth of the new “God-given” (богодарованыи) tsarevich, Ivan Ivanovich (28 March 1554), followed by another son, Fedor (31 May 1557). It shows that the veneration of Nicetas, a local saint, takes a new dimension due to imperial patronage6. The loss of the

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firstborn, as tragic as it may be, only adds to the providential dimension of Russian history. Just as Vasili III, a generation before, had to stay childless for a long time before having Ivan the Terrible (Degree 16, chapter 22), Ivan and Anastasia had to lose Dmitrii to finally be blessed with Ivan and Fedor.


Лета 7089-го [1581, sic] в великой пост в четвертую субботу преставися царь и великий князь Иван Васильевич всеа Русии, был на государстве много лет, а был женат 7-ма браками: 1 – царица и великая княгиня Анастасия Рамановна, от нея же 1 сын царевич Дмитрей, в младенчестве утонул в Шесхне реке тем обычаём, как государь ходил молился в Кириллов монастырь в судех вверх Шексною и из стану из шатров на судно царевича несла кормилица на руках, а кормилицу вели под руку царевичевы дядьки воевода Данило Раманович да Василий Михайлович Юрьевы, и по грешному делу царевич из руки у кормилицы упал на сходню, а [с] сходки в воду, и того часа выхватили, и онь залился.

This later source is free from the control of the Court and, obviously, gives us either unpalatable information or slanderous gossip, but is echoing an unofficial, uncensored tradition. Under an erroneous date (Ivan the Terrible died in 1584), it lists his “7 wives”, in itself a daring act, because the Orthodox Church would allow only for two successive unions. The firstborn from the first wife, Anastasia Romanovna, is Dmitrii. The chronicle says bluntly that he drowned in the Sheschna river, as his father was en route to St. Cyril monastery (not on his way back, as in the Nikonian chronicle). He did not fell ill, but was the victim of a most unfortunate accident: по грешному делу means there was some sort of “sin”, or “fault”. The Royal progress was made on boat, but each night, it would stop and the party would camp in tents. On the morning, two “little uncles” (дядьки) of the tsarevich, both boyars from the Romanov family (one of them, Daniil, Anastasia’s brother), took under her arms the kid’s nanny (кормилица), who herself held Dmitrii in her own arms. Thus they had to carry her aboard. But she lost grip of the child who fell on the footbridge, and then in the river. He was recovered, but already dead. Here, neglect or bad luck are the reason for this death, it looks like and ill omen and not a test of faith.

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7 The Book of Degrees of the Royal Genealogy..., t.2: 315-317.
9 In fact, the list gives only 6 names.
10 The term has an affective undertone but also an institutional meaning. These two parents on the mother side were supposed to protect the child from any harm.
4. An hearsay account by a foreign observer, ca. 1609. Isaac Massa’s *Short tale about Muscovy*[^1].

Van syne grootvorstinne wîrdên hem gebooren dry soonen, daervan was den eersten genaempt Demetrius, die verdoncken is noch een kint synde. Want te dier tyt was den Crimsen Tarter met groote verrassing ende gewelt int lant gevallen, doende alsins groote scade, ja deede de geene ooc viuchten die in Mosco woonden, met sampt haren grootvorst, den welcken vloot met synen gantsen scaet en hoffgesin na Bielaozera, synde uuter natueren enn stercke plaetse, liggende rondtom in een groot meer, seer sterck beslooten.

Also den grootvorst over voer eemael om ‘t leeger te besichtigen der Moscovitren, die rondtom ’t selve meyr lagen, hadde hy de vorstinne by hem dan in een ander jachte, die ’t selve kindt by haer hadde, en de jachten van hem en haer by malcander comende, eyste hy deesen Demetrio van haer om daer mede sich te verlustigen, en malcander ’t kint toereyckende viel het selve seer scielyck wyt hare handen tusschen de 2 booten int water en sonc ooc terstont als eenen steene, sonder hem meer te vinden; alsoo bleeff haren eersten soone, daer groote droefheyt om was in ganstchen rycke.

Isaac Massa (1586-1643), a Dutch trader-cum-diplomat, who stayed in Muscovy in 1601-1609, has heard there a tale similar to the one we read in the *Moscow Little Chronicle*. He confirms that tsarevich Dmitrii drowned in infancy, near the White Lake, by accident, as he was passed from one boat to another. But some details are quite different. In Massa’s tale, tsarina Anastasia herself is giving her son to Ivan the Terrible who wants to play with him. The baby falls into water like a stone, never to be recovered. Either Massa dramatizes the tale, the parents being directly responsible for the accident, instead of little uncles and nanny, or he tells the truth, unspeakable in a Russian source, even unofficial. He is wrong, though, on the circumstances explaining Ivan the Terrible’s presence in Beloozero. Massa writes that he was fleeing murderous raids from Crimean Tatars on Moscow and trying to organize defense. This happened later, in 1571, when Khan Devlet Girei wreaked havoc in Muscovy. In 1553, Moscow was safe and the tsar was indeed on a pilgrimage.

5. A strange quote from Ivan the Terrible’s first letter to Prince Andrei Kurbskii, 5 July 1564. *Первое послание Ивана Грозного Курбскому*[^2].

[^1]: *Skazanija Inostrannyx pisatelej o Rossii, izd. Arxeografičeskoy Komissiej, t.II, Izvestija Gollandcev Isaaka Massy i Il’i Germanna, 1868: 8 (Sankt-Peterburg, Eudard Prac).*
In his very long first letter to Andrei Kurbskii, Ivan the Terrible rejects all the accusations of tyranny and resents the fact that Kurbskii says he acted “against reason”, or as an unreasonable person. Then abruptly, he reminds Kurbskii of Constantine the Great who did not hesitate to kill his own son. This is a reference to the fate of Crispus, Constantine’s eldest son, who was executed in 326, presumably because his father suspected him of plotting to overthrow him. Most scholars have read this passage in the context of the sudden death of tsarevich Ivan Ivanovich, in November 1581, at the hand of his own father according to several sources. But Ivan the Terrible’s letter, now considered genuine, was written much earlier (1564). Should it be considered as an empty threat, or as a contorted way to exonerate himself from his guilt, after Dmitrii’s death in 1553? In this case, Massa would be right by saying that Ivan took part in the accident that caused the infant to drown.

II. KURBSKII’S PARABLE

It is a pity to cut and paste through Kurbskii’s work. He can be considered, with tsar Ivan himself, as one of the first writers in Russian early modern literature. Yet his tale of tsarevich Dmitrii’s death is ten pages long and cannot be reprinted in full. We shall quote only the most important phrases and focus on the careful composition, resembling that of a drama.

Act one. The Good adviser spurned. Scene 1: Ivan comes back in triumph from Kazan, but in his haste to return to Moscow and see his newborn son Dmitrii (following the poor advice of his brothers-in-law, the Romanovs), he abandons his army and squanders valuable resources. Scene 2: Ivan falls ill, is expected to die, but after several days begins to recover a little. Scene 3: Ivan takes a vow and decides to travel to St. Cyril’s monastery with his wife and child. One of his first stop on the way is the Trinity St. Sergius abbey. Scene 4: Maxim the Greek, described as the archetype of the holy man, expressly forbids Ivan to go to Beloozero and advise him to

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take care of the war widows and orphans instead. Scene 5. Ivan the Terrible persists in his vow and leaves Maxim who predicts the demise of young Dmitrii.

A в том тогда монастырю обитал Максимъ преподобный, мнихъ святые горы Афонские, Ватапеда монастыря, грекъ родом, муж зѣло мудрый и не токмо в ритарском искусстве многъ, но и филосов искусен. И уже въ лѣтѣхъ превосходные старости умащен и по Бозѣ в терпѣнію исповѣдническемъ украшень. Много бо претерпѣл от отца его многолѣтных и тяжких оков и многолѣтнаго заточения в прегорчайших темницах (…) А он был его из заточенія свободил по совѣту вѣкоторых синглитов своихъ, исповѣдующих ему, иже отнюдь неповинне страждеть таковыя блаженныя мужы. Тогда предреченный мнихъ Максим начал совѣтвавати ему, да нѣ едеть на такъ далекий путь, но и паче же со женою и с новорожденным отрочатем.

In that monastery there dwelt at that time the venerable Maxim, a monk from the monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos, the holy mountain; he was a Greek by birth, a very wise man, and not only was he great in the art of rhetorics, but also he was a skilled philosopher; and he was a man of ripe and venerable old age, adorned by God for his long-suffering as a confessor; for at the hands of his [Ivan’s] father [Vasilii III] he had endured much-long-lasting and grievous chains and long-lasting imprisonment in the direst prisons (…) and the grand prince had freed him from imprisonment on the advice of certain of his advisers, who told him that so blessed a man was suffering although he was completely guiltless. Now this monk Maxim, whom we have been talking about, began to advise him not to go on so distant a journey, especially as he had with him his wife and his newly-born infant.

«Аще, — рече, — и объцался еси тамо ѣхати, подвижуще святаго Кирилу на молитву ко Богу, но обѣ ты таковой с разумом не согласуютъ. А то сего ради: егда доставал еси так прегордаго и силнаго бусурманскаго царства, тогда и воинства християнскаго храброго тамо немало от поганов падоша, яже брашася с ними крѣпче по Бозе за православие. И тѣхъ избиенных жены и дѣти осиротѣли и матери обнищадѣли, во слезах многих и в скорбѣхъ пребываютъ. И далеко, — рече, — лучше тѣ тобѣ пожаловати и устроити, утѣшающе ихъ от таковыхъ бѣд и сокрѣбѣй, собравше ихъ ко своему царствѣнѣйшему граду, нежели тѣ обѣщанія не по разуму исполниати. (…) Понеже Богъ и святые его не по мѣсту объятія молитвам нашимъ внимаютъ, но по доброй волѣ нашей и по самовластію. И аще, — рече, — послушающе мене, здравъ будеши и многолѣтен со женою и отрочатем.» (…) Онъ же, яко гордый человѣкъ, упрямся, толико: «Ѣхати да ехати, — рече, — ко святому Кирилу.» (…) 

Although, he said, you promised to go there to urge St. Cyril to pray for you to God, such vows are not in accordance with wisdom. The reason for this is as follows: when you were conquering the proud strong Mussulman kingdom, there fell at the hands of the pagans many who with God fought firmly against them for the Orthodox faith; and the wives of those who were killed were widowed, their children were orphaned and their mothers lost their sons, and they continue to lament and to grieve much. And, he said, it would be far better to reward them and to settle them, comforting them in such troubles and sorrows and calling them to your ruling city, rather than to fulfill promises which are contrary to wisdom (…) For God and His saints listen to our prayers not according to their length, but according to our good will and according to our free will. And, if, he said, you listen to me, you will enjoy health and long life

17 Razum means knowledge, wisdom, understanding, intelligence, competence, compassion, good sense.
18 Other possible interpretation: not according to the place from where we utter them.
with your wife and infant” (...) But the tsar, like a proud man, was stubborn and merely said “We must go, we must go to Saint Cyril”.

Егда видѣ́в преподобный Максим, иже презрѣ́л его совѣ́тъ и ко Ѣханию безгодному устремился царь, исполнився духа пророческаго, начал прорицати ему: «Аще, — рече, — не послушаеши мене, по Бозѣ́ совѣ́тующаго, и забудеши крови оных мучеников, избненных от паганов за правовѣ́ріе, и презриши слезы сиротъ оных и вдовицъ, и поѣ́дѣ́ши со упрямствомъ, вѣ́дь о семъ, иже сынь твой умрет и не возвратится оттуды жив. Аще же послушаеши, и возвратишился, здрав будеши яко самъ, такъ и сынъ твой». И сия словеса приказал ему четырьмя нами: первый — исповѣ́дникъ его, презвитер Андрѣ́й Протопоповъ, други́й — Иоаннъ, княза Мстиславского, а третей — Алексѣ́й Адашевъ, ложничей его, четвертымъ — мною. (…)

When the venerable Maxim saw that the tsar disregarded his advice and was determined to go on his useless journey, he was filled with the spirit of prophecy and began to prophesy to him: “If, he said, you do not listen to me who advise you according to God and if you forget the blood of those martyrs who were slaughtered by the pagans in the name of Orthodoxy, and if you overlook the tears of those orphans and widows and set off with stubbornness, then know that your son shall die and shall not return from there alive; but if you listen to me and return, you shall enjoy health, both you and your son”. And he enjoined four of us to convey these words to him: first his confessor, the archpriest Andrei; second, Prince Ivan Mstislavski; third Alexei Adashev, his gentleman of the bed-chamber; and fourthly, me.

Act 2. The triumph of the evil adviser. Scene 1: Ivan goes to another monastery to meet with Vassian Toporkov, a former bishop, who was a counsellor of his father’s. Scene 2: He asks him what he should do to be a good ruler. Scene 3: Toporkov tells him not to keep a counsellor wiser than himself. Scene 4: Andrei Kurbskii rants against Toporkov’s “syllogism”. Scene 5: Ivan continues his unreasonable pilgrimage and loses his son, returning in great sorrow to Moscow.

Приходитъ царь до оного старца въ кѣ́лью и, вѣ́дая, яже отцу его единовѣ́рнникъ был и во всемъ удовны и согласенъ, вопрошает его: «Како бы моглъ добре царствовать и великихъ и силныхъ своихъ въ послушствѣ́ имѣ́ти?» И подобало рещи ему: «Самому царю достоит быти яко главѣ́ и любити мудрыхъ совѣ́тниковъ своихъ, яко свои уды» (…) Онъ же что рече? Абие началъ шептали ему во ухо, по древней своей обыкновенной злости, яко и отцу его древле ложное сиковацие 
[На поле: лжещивание] шепталъ и таково слово реклъ: «И аще хощеши самодержецъ быти, не держи собѣ́ совѣ́тника ни единаго мудрѣ́йшаго собя, понеже самъ еси всѣ́хъ лутчш. Тако будеши твердъ на царствѣ́ и всѣ́хъ имѣ́ти будеши въ рукахъ своихъ. И аще будеши имѣ́ть мудрѣ́йшихъ близу собя, по нужде будеши послушень имъ». И сице совпете сильлогизм сотанинскій. Царь же абие руку его поцеловал и рече: «О, аще и отец был бы ми жив, таковаго глагола полезнаго не поведал бы ми ! »

The tsar came to this elder in his cell and knowing that he had been of one accord with his father and had been pleasing to him and in agreement with him in everything, he asked him: «How might I rule well and hold my great and powerful subjects in obedience ? » And he should have answered: “The tsar himself ought to be head [of the body] and he ought to love his wise counsellors as though they were his own limbs” (...) But what did he say ? He straightway began to whisper in his hear according to his old evil custom, just as of old he used
to whisper false sycophancy in his father's ear; and this is what he said: "If you wish to be an autocrat, do not keep beside you a single counsellor wiser than yourself; for you yourself are better than all; thus you shall be firm in the realm and you shall hold all your men in your hands. And if you keep near you men wiser than yourself, then perforce you will be subject to them". And thus he spun his satanic syllogism. But the tsar immediately kissed his hand and said: “O, even if my father had been alive, he would not have given me such useful advice!"

O сынъ диаволь ! про что человеческаго естества, вкратце рещи, жилы пресекл еси, и всю крепость разрушил и оттял хотыша, таковую искру безбожную в сердце царя христианскаго вселял, от неже во всей Святорусской земли таков пожар лют возгорелся, о немъе свидетельствоват слова мно не потреба ? (…) Напившися царь христианскій от православнаго епископа таковаго смертоноснаго яду, поплыл в путь свой Яхромою-рекою аже до Волги, Волгою жъ плыль колко десять милль до Шексны-реки велики, и Шексною вверхъ аже до езера великаго Бѣлаго, на немже мѣсто и градъ стоятъ. И не доѣзжающи монастыря Кирилова, еще Шексною-рѣкою пльвучи, сынъ ему, по пророчеству святаго, умер. Се первая радость за молитвами оного предреченнаго епископа! Се полученая мзда за обѣщания не по разуму, паче же не богоугодныхъ! И оттуду приѣхалъ до оного Кирилова монастыря в печали мнозъ и въ тузѣ, и возвратился тощими руками во мнозей скорби до Москвы.

O son of the devil ! Why, in short, did you sever the veins of human nature and, intending to destroy and remove all strength, sow in the heart of the Christian tsar such a godless spark, from which throughout the whole Holy Russian land so fierce a conflagration blazed up ? There is, I think, no need to expatiate on this. (…) When the Christian tsar had been made to drink his fill of such deadly poison by the Orthodox bishop, he set off by boat on his journey along the Yakhroma river as far as the Volga; and along the Volga he sailed several tens of miles as far as the great Sheksna river; and he sailed up the Sheksna river as far as the great White Lake, on which stand the town and fortress [of Beloozero]. And before reaching the monastery of St Cyril, while sailing along the river Sheksna, his son died, as the holy man had prophesied. Such was the first joy resulting from the prayers of that bishop we have been talking about ! Such was the reward received for promises which were not in accordance with reason and, what is more, were not pleasing to God ! And from there he went to the monastery of St. Cyril in much grief and affliction, and he returned with empty hands and in great sorrow to Moscow.

Kurbaskii was, indeed, a disciple and an admirer of Maxim the Greek. They both were on the side of the “poor Church” (just like Savonarola), against the disciples of Joseph of Volokolamsk, whereas Vassian Toporkov, by blood nephew of Joseph, was one of “that cunning Josephian band”¹⁹. But Kurbaskii’s tale has a wider scope. His diptych opposing two religious figures, the good counsellor Maxim, telling the unpalatable truth to the tsar, and the sycophant Vassian, igniting the worst in the tsar’s soul, is in fact a reflection on the nature and the good use of royal power. There, Kurbaskii also develops the concept of “Holy Russian land” (Святорусская земля), which he invented. Far from being an instrument of glorification of the tsarist regime (as it will be in the 19th C.), Holy Russia is understood by Kurbaskii as the

community of the suffering heroes who defended Christendom against “pagans” (the Muslim Tatars) and were rewarded with persecution by an ungrateful tsar\textsuperscript{20}. Indeed, Kurbskii, himself a “bellator” is much concerned by the fate of the noblemen who fought bravely during the Kazan campaign (and later in the Livonian war), many of them dying in the process. Their widows and children should be generously provided for, while the living ones should be considered as the precious limbs of the body of the State, the tsar being the head. Thus, the very idea that a sovereign should not have counsellors wiser than himself is counterproductive: Ivan III, the grandfather of Ivan the Terrible “increased his frontiers to such an extent (...) because he took frequent counsel with his wise and bold advisers” (так далеко границы свои разширил... много его совета ради с мудрыми и мужественными сицилитеты его). It is also a capital sin that may ruin the all Christian realm, because in this case the tsar behaves like Lucifer, the fallen angel. When Toporkov whispers “You are better than all men, and it is not befitting for you to have any wise man beside you” – as though he were saying: “for you are equal to God” (понеже еси Богу равен)\textsuperscript{21}. 

These questions of political philosophy were of utmost importance at the time when Andrei Kurbskii’s \textit{History of the grand prince of Moscow} was copied and read, in the 1670s-1680s. And the story of tsarevich Dmitrii had a peculiar interest, because the Romanov ruling dynasty experienced a series of untimely deaths. In 1669, tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich lost his wife Maria Miloslavskaia (3 March), and his son, tsarevich Semen (18 June). On 17 January 1670, followed the death of tsarevich Aleksei Alekseevich. The widowed tsar married Natalia Naryshkina (22 January 1671) who gave birth to Peter Alekseevich (to be Peter the Great, 30 May 1672). But soon after that tsar Aleksei deceased (30 January 1676) and was followed by his son from his first marriage, tsar Fedor Alekseevich (27 April 1682). In fact, during this decade, the monarchy, although preserving its autocratic nature, experienced a crisis and many people asked themselves questions about what was happening within the ruling family, had it lost God’s blessing? The curious story of Ivan the Terrible, archetype of the tsar, spurning the admonition of a venerable starets and paying a heavy price for it could impress the reader.

Kurbskii’s body of works, besides his \textit{History of the grand prince of Moscow} and his correspondence with Ivan IV, contains quite a few religious texts, translations and original,


\textsuperscript{21} Fennell, J.L.I. 1965: 84-85.
where one can feel the influence of Maxim. But is the tale of tsarevich Dmitrii’s demise really grounded in Maxim’s teaching?

III. MAXIM THE GREEK AND OLD-RUSSIAN TRADITION ON VOWS AND PILGRIMAGE

The collected texts of Maxim the Greek, yet to be fully published in a scientific edition, do not mention the untimely death of tsarevich Dmitrii, nor Maxim’s prophecy about it. Some of his sermons are very firm about the obligation to honor one’s vows. To admonish his reader he quotes Psalm 5:7: Погубиши всѧ глаголющы лжу, мужа крове и льсти гнушается Господь (“Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing; the Lord will abhor the bloody and deceitful man”) and Ecclesiastes 5.4-5: Лучше, рече Мудрость Божиа, не обьщавши и отдать Богу, неже обьщавши сълати (“Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay”). He also quotes Psalm 76.11 (75/12): Помолитеся и отдадите Господеви молитвы ваша (“Vow and pay unto the Lord your God”). This strict views can already be found in the classic of Old-Russian monastic literature, the Paterik of the Kievan Caves monastery (ca. 1225), very well known in 16th and 17th Century Muscovy. In his address to Polycarp at the end of Discourse (or Sermon) 21 of the Paterik, bishop Simon writes: “For you yourself said to me: “Better for me to spend everything I have on the needs of the Church. Let it not be spent in vain and destroyed by war or thieves or fire”. I praised your good intentions. For the Scripture says: Vow and pay your vows”, and “It is better that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay”.

Nevertheless, Maxim position on vows in general is not as uncompromising as it seems at first sight. First, he frequently uses the term “vow” (обьтъ) in the narrow sense of monastic vows, who should not in any case be broken. Maxim insists also on the fact that one must make a vow on his own free will (данные Богу добровольно обьты; обьщавшеся Владыцъ самоволнѣ). One can see the same idea in the Paterik of the Kievan Caves monastery: by saying “you yourself said to me” Simon shows that Polycarp vowed on his own free will.

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Moreover, on the important question of fasting, Maxim makes a clear distinction between the spirit and the letter:

Maxim’s Parable on the disorders of the kings that be (Слово пространнѣе излагающе съ жалостию нестроениа и бесчинна царей и властелѣхъ послѣдняго вѣка сего) is well known because it is a powerful echo of Savonarola’s depiction of the Church as a weeping widow, sitting on the side of the road. Maxim depicts Vassilia, allegory of Power, who laments because “those who are ruling nowadays… do not take any advice for the common good from those show them goodwill”, but succumb to their passions and leave her in neglect. The connection with Kurbskii’s charge against Vassian Toporkov is evident. Maxim and Kurbskii were clearly sharing the same opinion about good counsellors.

Finally, a clear and positive distinction between pilgrimage of the soul, and real pilgrimage can be found in Old-Russian religious tradition. It is not made by Maxim, but by the first and very famous pilgrim from Rus’ to Jerusalem, Daniel “abbot of the Russian land” (ca. 1104-1107). His text was still popular in Muscovy and Kurbskii must have read it. Daniel shows the same preference for “charity to the poor” as Maxim in Kurbskii’s tale. The following lines are at the very beginning of Daniel’s tale.

References:

Behold, I, the unworthy abbot Daniel of the Russian land, least of all monks, humbled by many sins and lacking in any good deed, urged by my own imagination and impatience, conceived a desire to see the holy city of Jerusalem and the Promised Land. (...) And all this I saw with my own sinful eyes, and merciful God let me see what I long desired in my thoughts. (...) I have written this for the faithful. For if anyone hearing about these holy places should grieve in his soul and his thoughts for these holy places, he shall receive the same reward from God as those who shall have travelled to the holy places. For many good men living at home in their own places, by their thoughts, charity to the poor, and their good deeds, attain the holy places and receive a great reward from God our Savior Jesus Christ. And many who have travelled to the holy places and to the holy city of Jerusalem have become conceited in their own mind as if they had done something good and thus lose the reward for their labor, and of these I am the first.

As often, in Old-Russian culture, the first and last word may come from the Scriptures.

Three important quotes testify to the sacrifice of the firstborn.

Исх.13.1 И рече Господь Мовсею глагола: остави ми вселаго первенца перворожденного, разверзающего вселожесна в сынахъ Израилевыхъ ё человѣка до скота, иако мнѣ есть
Ex.13.1-2 And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast; it is mine.

Книга 4 Царствъ 3:27. И [царь Моавль] полы сына своего первенца, егоже воочи вмѣсто себе, и вознесе его во всесожженіе на стѣнѣ и бысть раскаленѣ великое во Израили и ёстипша ё него и возвратишася в землю свою
II Kings 3.27 Then he [the king of Moab] took his eldest son hat should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall.

As Adrian Schenker has explained, “The Wisdom of Solomon interprets the passover sacrifice of Ex. 12 as the first sacrifice for the redemption of first-born human beings (according to Ex. 13). The feast of the Passover is the feast for the institution of the redemption of the first-born. The law requiring an offering for the primogeniture and the redemption of the first-born sons of man is the meaning behind the enigmatic expression « the law of the divinity » in Wisdom 18:9.”

If we read Andrei Kurbskii’s tale of the demise of tsarevich Dmitrii as a source on history of mentalities in Late Medieval or Early Modern Russia, we can reach two distinct conclusions. The first one is that Kurbskii’s tale is a political fiction. According to it, Ivan the Terrible concluded a kind of Faustian pact with his evil advisers (or with himself): let us get rid of wise and good men and rule by vice and terror instead of virtue and honor. The loss of the son is but the “first joy” (i.e. first punishment) for this bereavement. This is a terrible lesson for any young ruler. On the contrary, one can admit the story of the two interviews, with Maxim the Greek and with Vassian Toporkov, as fundamentally true (with some literary embellishments by Kurbskii). The tsar, still young at 23, traumatized by memories of his youth as an orphan raised by turbulent boyars, and by his recent illness, is persuaded that his dead father Vasili III gives him a very sound advice, through Toporkov. Being devout almost to the point of superstition he insists on accomplishing his pilgrimage. He is aware that Maxim’s prophecy could turn true, but prefers risking his son’s life than breaking his vow. He assuages his guilt, after Dmitrii’s death by mulling on the Bible verses concerning the offering of the firstborn to the Lord. The literati of 16th and 17th Century Muscovy were of course aware of these quotes. In the 1670s, when the question of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich’s succession increasingly concerned the Muscovites, the story of Tsarevich Dmitrii’s death again attracted great interest at the Muscovite court.

Abstract

In the year 1553, still recovering from a grave illness, Ivan the Terrible undertakes a pilgrimage to the faraway St. Cyril’s monastery on the White Lake. During the trip, his first-born son, the infant tsarevich Dmitrii dies. The circumstances of this death are not explained the same way by all sources. According to prince Andrei Kurbskii, a polemist and a defector to Poland after 1564, Maksim the Greek had told the tsar that his trip was dangerous and that he could accomplish his vow in spirit instead of travelling for real, but Ivan the Terrible insisted on keeping true to the letter. Is this an historic episode, or part of the transmission of Maksim’s political and religious teaching through his disciple Andrei Kurbskii?